



4-1-2006

Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs*

Wallace Gray

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>

Recommended Citation

Gray, Wallace (2006) "Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 54 : No. 54 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol54/iss54/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Comparative Civilizations Review* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs*. New York: Harper San Francisco, 2002.

This review will deal with two main topics--the message (signs of when a religion is turning evil) and messenger (author Charles Kimball).

A. The Message

Just reading the title of this book raises the urgent and obvious question:

What are the five warning signs that a religion is turning evil? Each sign is also a chapter title in the body of the work:

1. Absolute truth claims
2. Blind obedience
3. Establishing the "ideal" time
4. The end justifies any means
5. Declaring holy war

1. After addressing the question "Is Religion the Problem?" in the first chapter, author Charles Kimball turns to the issue of *absolute truth claims* in the second. "When particular conceptualizations lead to rigid doctrine and cocksure certainty about God, the likelihood of major problems increases rapidly."

2. Kimball's story is replete with instances from Biblical times to current news events. Here I'll limit myself to one of his examples that is perhaps less familiar to Western readers.

Blind obedience was epitomized by the followers of Asahara Shoko, leader of the Aum Shinrikyo movement. At the outset Master Asahara drew his teachings from the deep wells of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. However, in a few years he had come to demand and enforce "unquestioning devotion to his destructive and apocalyptic vision." As a result, on March 20, 1995, "his devoted followers simultaneously released sarin, the deadly nerve gas, in sixteen central Tokyo subway stations shortly after 8 A.M.... The assault left twelve people dead, more than five thousand injured, and a nation in

shocked disbelief." Kimball defines the turning point as when followers had become convinced that they no longer needed to think for themselves. "Master Asahara's views were all that mattered. This is a pivotal point at which religion becomes evil. Authentic religion engages the intellect...."

3. Although *establishing the "ideal" time* is the least intuitive of Kimball's five symptoms of religion gone awry, his earlier expression "apocalyptic vision" is a tip-off to the reader. In this context "apocalyptic" refers to any judgmental and destructive "end-time" brought on by blind adherence to absolute truth as proclaimed on a day-by-day basis by some masterful con-artist or pitifully self-deluded leader.

Some fundamentalist Christians interpreted the decisive Six Day War in 1967 as the "ideal" time for the prophesied restoration of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem in that it was bound to usher in the Second Coming of Christ. Persons so persuaded will support Israel uncritically. They cannot be bothered as to who heads Israel's government or what its policies are. God and such slavish followers are concerned only with a predetermined time table; the issue of specific leaders and policies makes no difference to them. As Kimball comments, "It makes a great deal of difference to Israelis and Palestinians." I guess for true believers the others don't count for much.

Yehuda Etzion in 1985 was convicted of a plot based on the necessity in his words, "to purify the Temple Mount [in Jerusalem] from the grip of Islam." One of the planned options described by Kimball was for a reserve Israeli pilot "to steal a military jet and bomb the Dome of the Rock." For these conspirators, the ideal time is when the Jewish side can "purify" a holy site by bombing its mosques and killing or wounding any Muslims who might happen to be worshipping in it.

Kimball, a careful and appreciative scholar of Islam, nevertheless writes:

"The Islamic religious tradition is particularly susceptible to this volatile combination." And what precisely is the combination? Here is his one-sentence answer: "When the hoped-for ideal is tied to a particular religious worldview and those who wish to implement their vision become convinced that they know what God wants for them and everyone else, you have a prescription for disaster." Kimball's statement ties together several of his warning signals.

A nuanced view of each world religion will slow the rush of any particular faith toward tendencies leading toward destructive suffering. The book displays such a view in its utilization of many respected aca-

democratic and activist sources. There is skillful interweaving of insights from a number of well known authorities in the field of world religions.

Huston Smith is a premier writer and speaker. When asked by Bill Moyers whether religion in essence was evil, Smith answered, "Religion is like a cow. It can kick and it can provide wholesome milk."

On reflection, most of us realize that a religion is seldom just one thing. Religions have both enhanced and degraded the lives of women. Kimball discusses rather thoroughly what he terms, "perhaps the most egregious example" of abuse of women, female genital mutilation (also known as female circumcision). He gives a specific description of the procedure, a little history on its origin, and a summary of its prevalence. While it is not practiced by Muslims worldwide, it has the approval of clerics in enough of Africa to be of concern. The rationale is, surprisingly, "female honor." The extent to which female honor is used to justify inhumane and cruel acts is, as Kimball notes, absurd. The hope he expresses is that the example and practice of more enlightened Muslims may overcome this evil anti-feminine, anti-human reality. The key again is critical reasoning and decisive action in terms, among other things, of better models of appropriate modern Muslim behavior.

Professor Muhammad Talbi, who teaches history at the University of Tunis, is an "active participant in interfaith dialogue programs sponsored by the World Council of Churches" and over a period of time provided significant information for Kimball. Talbi's studies "lead him to support strongly the kind of secular state visible in Tunisia and to advocate a similar approach elsewhere." Tunisia offers just the kind of modeling that should prove effective in the long run. As Kimball summarizes:

Although Tunisia's population is over 90 percent Muslim, it stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. Women, in Tunisia, for instance, have equal rights and legal protection under the law. Women drive cars and vote; polygamy is illegal; birth control and abortion are legal. [Professor] Talbi represents a progressive tradition within Islam, arguing that Islam must continually adjust and adapt to the realities of the day. Today, he believes, secular states protecting religious freedom hold the key to developing a community of communities in our interdependent, pluralist world. (Note 15 found on page 226)

4. Concerning the evil sign, *the end justifies any means*, Kimball details recent incidents of mutual slaughter between Hindus and Muslims in India. In critiquing the Hindu side of this conflict:

For Hindus as well as all other people of faith, the ultimate focus of religion--liberation or salvation--cannot be disconnected from life in this world. In authentic, healthy religion the end and the means to that end are always connected. But it is often easy for religious people to lose sight of the ultimate goal and focus instead on one component of religion [such as sacred spaces]. When a key feature of religion is elevated and in effect becomes an end, some people within the religion become consumed with protecting or achieving that end.

The most obvious sign of this corruption is visible when compassionate and constructive relationships with others are discarded.

5. The fifth and last sign is explained in the chapter on Declaring Holy War. Here Kimball does a careful historical analysis of the concepts of Crusade and Jihad in their respective religious settings, as well as of the related terms, peace, shalom, salam. Particularly instructive is his section on "From Pacifism to Just War," in which he explains how Christianity was pacifistic for its first three centuries but developed the just war concept as the earlier vision was increasingly displaced by considerations of political and military power.

He cites John Ferguson, who in his *War and Peace in the World's Religions* (Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 103) states that Christians heretofore had been "given over to peace" because "God prohibits killing even in a just cause, without exception [because] the weapons of the Christian [are] prayer, justice and suffering." The just war theory was developed along parallel lines by Islamic scholars using similar justifications. The chief weakness in such sets of criteria is that some authority must decide upon when the criteria are met or violated. One always tends to say "our side" is meeting them but the enemy's side is violating them.

B. An Unapologetically Subjective Messenger

The 240 pages of this book, despite the absence of an index, provide the best presentation of the relevant facts, grim realities and grounds for action and hope that I have found among many treatments of the problem of *when religion becomes evil*. In part this is true because Kimball does not write as a spectator sports-writer but rather the fully committed (but not uncritical) participant.

His paternal grandfather was "one of nine children in a Jewish family that emigrated . . ." They thrived as a "highly successful" vaudeville family. "Grandpa met and married a Presbyterian chorus girl in the

vaudeville show. He remained Jewish; she remained Presbyterian. Their four children . . . all became Christian." Of his grandfather Kimball writes, he "was the most wonderful person I knew We were imbued with the notion that it was good to be Jewish. Growing up in Oklahoma, I discovered at an early age that many people did not share this view of Judaism."

Kimball was raised as a Southern Baptist, received what he considers an excellent theological education at a Southern Baptist seminary, and earned a doctor of theology degree at Harvard. He is presently professor of religion and chair of his department at Wake Forest University, after a career in ecumenical work and as director of interfaith programs for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, "an international organization committed to nonviolent conflict resolution." He has spent much academic and peace-work time in the Middle East. He writes that he became involved in the 1979 events in which fifty-three Americans were held hostage during a "444-day ordeal."

From the outset, . . . the Iranian government indicated its willingness to meet representatives of the religious community rather than the U.S. government officials Since I was one of two clergy in the group who had studied the Qur'an and the Islamic religious tradition, Iranian religious and political leaders received me warmly.

In his concluding chapter he argues for "An Inclusive Faith Rooted in a Tradition." He gives balanced evaluations, including both appreciation and critique, of "Options for Christian Thinking." They are: Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism. In the brief treatment on inclusivism he quotes John Paul II who was addressing the many religious leaders he had invited to Assisi for a World Day of Prayer. The pope said that this day had underlined "our conviction" as "inculcated by the Second Council [Vatican II], about the unity of the origin and goal of the human family, about the meaning and value of non-Christian religions--without the least shadow of confusion or syncretism."

Kimball concedes that nothing like full consensus has occurred on the various paradigms of inter-faith relationships. Of himself he writes, "My olive tree has deep roots." One's heritage sometimes manifests ways in which it transcends even its own limitations and stereotypes. Two such "breakings-out" are spotlighted near the end of the book. In the section on Exclusivism he writes of his senior pastor in 1972 when Kimball was youth minister in a Southern Baptist church in Tulsa.

During a conversation in the home of the pastor, who was an

aggressively evangelical preacher, I indicated that I was interested in studying world religions in seminary and exploring biblical passages on religious diversity. His response surprised me and stunned his children. He immediately pointed out that God is far greater than our understanding of God.... Even though he said he was "95 percent sure" that explicit faith in Christ was not the only means to salvation, he indicated that he would continue to preach and teach the scriptures as he had for forty years. He explained his rationale in this way: I know what Christ had done for me; my responsibility is to share the good news with others; even though I'm 95 percent sure (based on biblical teachings alone) that all kinds of people are meaningfully related to God, the 5 percent of uncertainty remains; whether the Christian faith is the only way or a primary way to salvation, I am still responsible for proclaiming what God has done in Christ. This pastor went on to encourage my study and exploration in seminary without fear of discovering new truths. It was a wonderful, liberating moment.

As a result of this amazingly unexpected encouragement, Kimball was able to expose himself to the kinds of experience and religious studies that led him to a wise word from the Qur'an (5:48):

If God had so willed, He would have created you one community, but [He did not do so] that He may test you in what He has given you; so compete with one another in good works. To God you shall all return and He will tell you the truth about that which you have been disputing.

If both the Qur'an and some exponents of Exclusivism can put in a good word for disputation without closure on all certainties, it is to be hoped that we students of civilization can benefit. Even when we cogitate upon such a weighty issue as the possibility of either cooperation between Islam and a nascent Christendom or war between them, we still must not overlook the diversity within every such civilizational or cultural entity.

In addition to some of the things that groups and their leaders can do, there is one thing that Kimball helps all readers to do. His advice runs like this: "Now please think for yourselves on what I have told you about the facts as I see them. Consider the less violent options that seem to be available. Allow yourself some chance for personal reorientation as a basis for individual and social change."

Wallace Gray